Why Do Muslims Fast?
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Most of us who are fighting the battle of the bulge have experimented with some form of fasting, like an all fruit fast, a water fast or an sugar-free fast, you name it. But what many may find rather strange and intriguing is a whole nation of people;
be it man or woman, old or young, rich or poor; going completely without food and drink from dawn to dusk for a whole month - Ramadan. What is the significance of Ramadan beyond shortened work hours? Is it not a very harsh practice? Is it merely a time when Muslims sleep and fast and hardly work all day; and eat, drink, enjoy and stay awake all night? What really is the spirit of Ramadan?

Fasting Prescribed in All Religions

In English "fasting" means to abstain from food or from certain kinds of food voluntarily, as an observance of a holy day or as a token of grief, sorrow, or repentance.[1] This practice can be found in most of the major religions of the world. For example, in Hinduism, fasting in Sanskrit is called *upavaasa*. Devout Hindus observe fasting on special occasions as a mark of respect to their personal gods or as a part of their penance. Most devout Indians fast regularly or on special occasions like festivals. On such days they do not eat at all, eat once or make do with fruits or a special diet of simple food.[2] For Jews, the day Yom Kippur ("Day of Atonement") is the last of the Ten Days of Repentance observed on the 10th of Tishri. It is forbidden on that day to eat, drink, wash, wear leather, or have sexual relations. In addition, prohibitions on labor similar to those on the Sabbath are in force.[3] It should also be noted that Moses (peace be upon him) is recorded in the Torah to have fasted.

"And he was there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights, he neither ate bread not drank water." (Exodus 34:28)
For Catholics among Christians, Lent is the major season of fasting, imitative of the forty-day fast of Jesus (peace be upon him). In the fourth century it was observed as six weeks of fasting before Easter or before Holy Week. It was adjusted to forty days of actual fasting in most places in the seventh century.[4] Jesus (peace be upon him) is recorded in the Gospels to have fasted like Moses.

"And he fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward he was hungry." (Matthew 4:2 & Luke 4:2)

It is in this context that God states in the Quran: **"O believers! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you in order that you become more conscious of God." (Quran 2:183)**

Among the Best Righteous Deeds

Although in most religions, fasting is for expiation of sin or atonement for sin, in Islam it is primarily to bring one closer to God, as stated in the above-mentioned verse. Since, God-

consciousness is the prerequisite for righteousness, great stress is placed on fasting in Islam. Thus, it is not surprising to find that when Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was asked:

"Which is the best deed?" He replied, "Fasting, for there is nothing equal to it." (*Al-Nasa'i*)

There are as many levels of fasting as there are facets to being human. Proper fasting should encompass all dimensions of human existence for it to have the divinely intended effect. The following are some of the major levels of fasting:

The Levels of Fasting

The Ritual Level
This level of fasting requires that the basic rules for fasting be fulfilled, which are avoiding food, drink and sexual intercourse between dawn and sunset for 29 or 30 days each year. On this level, one is basically following the letter of the laws regarding fasting without particular consideration for the spirit of fasting. It is the entrance level which must be fulfilled for the fast to be Islamicly correct, but the other levels must be added for the fast to have any real impact on the fasting person. Fasting on this level alone will not benefit one spiritually, except from the perspective of submission to divine instructions, if one chooses to follow the ritual consciously and not merely according to tradition. Thus, by itself, the ritual level will not purify one of sin or atone for sin.

The Physical Level
Fasting on the "physical" level causes the fasting person to experience the pangs of hunger and thirst when the prophetic (Sunnah) way of fasting is observed. Prophet Muhammad used to consume a very light meal before the dawn (*suhoor*) and moderate meal (*iftaar*) to break the fast at sunset, while scrupulously avoiding filling his stomach.

He is reported to have said:
"The worst container a human being can fill is his stomach. A few morsels of food to keep a person's back straight are sufficient. However, if his desire overcomes him, then let him eat a third, drink a third and leave a third for breathing." (*Ibn Majah*)

before beginning the sunset prayer.[5] This level allows the fasting person to experience the pangs of hunger and thirst and thereby develops sympathy in him or her for those starving and dying of thirst in other parts of the world.

Medical Benefits
On the physical level, some chemicals in the brain that transmit messages and create feelings, called neurotransmitters, are affected by fasting. Fasting encourages the endorphin neurotransmitter system, related to the feeling of well being and euphoria, to produce more endorphins and, in fact, makes us "feel" better. This is similar to the effect of exercise (but without the physical work).It has also been noted by medical experts that fasting improves the physical health in numerous ways. For example, during the fast the body uses up stored

cholesterol (fat) that is often deposited in the blood system, as well as in other fatty areas of the body. Thus, it helps to keep the body firm and minimizes the danger of heart attacks. The difference between the ritual level 1 and the physical level 2 is that a person dong only ritual fasting may eat large meals prior to beginning the fast and immediately upon ending the fast, and thus not feel any hunger or thirst throughout the whole month. However, like level one, if the fasting person does not incorporate the other levels of fasting, the fast will only be physically exhausting. The Prophet said:

"Perhaps a fasting person will gain nothing but hunger and thirst from fasting."(*Ibn Majah*)

The Libidinal Level

The sexual instinct and drives (libido) are harnessed on this level of fasting. In these times where the media continually plays on sexual desires to promote and sell products, the ability to control these powerful desires is a plus. Fasting physically reduces sexual desires and the fact that the fasting person has to avoid anything which could stimulate him psychologically helps to further lower the libido. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

"O youths, whoever among you is able to marry let him do so, for it restrains the eyes and protects the private parts. He who is unable to marry should fast, because it is a shield." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

By restraining oneself from sexual acts which are permissible, the fasting person makes it easier for himself to restrain himself from forbidden sexual acts when he is not fasting.

The Emotional Level

Fasting on this level involves controlling the many negative emotions which simmer in the human mind and soul. For example, among the most destructive emotions is anger. Fasting helps to bring this emotion under control. Prophet Muhammad, said:

"When one of you is fasting, he should abstain from indecent acts and unnecessary talk, and if someone begins an obscene conversation or tries to pick an argument, he should simply tell him, 'I am fasting.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Thus, on this level, whatever negative emotions challenge the fasting person must be avoided. One must abstain from lewd conversation and heated arguments. Even when one is in the right, it is better to let that right go and keep one's emotional fast intact. Likewise, the negative emotion of jealousy is reduced, as every fasting person is reduced to the common denominator of abstinence; no one is externally superior to another in this regard.

The Psychological Level

This level helps the fasting person psychologically to control evil thoughts and trains him or her, to some degree, how to overcome stinginess and greed. The Prophet was reported to have said:

"Allah has no need for the hunger and the thirst of the person who does not restrain himself from telling

lies and acting on them even while observing the fast." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

In this age of immediate gratification, when the things of the world are used to fulfill human needs and desires almost as soon as they have them the ability to delay gratification is an important skill. What is between immediate gratification and delayed gratification is patience. During the fast, the believers learn patience and the benefits of it.

From a psychological perspective, it is good to be somewhat detached from the things of the world. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a good and full life - in fact, one can and should expect that. However, it is important that people are able to detach ourselves from material things so that they do not become the most important part of their lives.

Fasting gives one the opportunity to overcome the many addictions which have become a major part of modern life. Food, for many people, provides comfort and joy, and the ability to separate oneself from it gives the fasting people the psychological benefit of knowing that they do have some degree of control over what they do and what they do not do.

The Spiritual Level

In order to establish this, the highest and most important level of fasting, the level of God-consciousness, Prophet Muhammad made the renewal of the intention for fasting a requirement before every day of fasting. He was reported to have said:

"Whoever does not intend to fast before Fajr (the dawn) will have no fast." (*Abu Dawud*)

The daily renewal of intention helps to establish a spiritual foundation of sincerity essential for the spiritual cleansing effects of fasting to operate. Sincere fasting purifies and atones for sin, as the Prophet said:

"Whoever fasts Ramadan out of sincere faith and seeking his reward from God, his previous sins will be forgiven."

He was also reported to have said, "From one Ramadaan to the next is atonement for the sins between them." Sincere fasting brings one closer to Allah and earns a special reward. The Prophet informed that there is a gate in paradise called Rayyaan reserved for those who fast and he also said:

"When Ramadan comes, the gates of Paradise are open." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Fasting is primarily between the person and God, as no one can be sure that any person is actually fasting. Because of this intimate aspect of fasting, Allah was quoted by the Prophet as saying:

"Every act of Aadam's descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I alone will give the reward for it." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

When combined with the previous levels of fasting, this level transforms a person from within.

It restores, revives and regenerates the fasting person's spirituality and radically modifies his or her personality and character. These are the precious products of aheightened state of God-consciousness.

On the first day of the following month, after another new moon has been sighted, a special celebration is made, called Id al-Fitr. A quantity of staple food is donated to the poor (Zakat al-Fitr), everyone has bathed and put on their best, preferably new, clothes, and communal prayers are held in the early morning, followed by feasting and visiting relatives and friends.

There are other fast days throughout the year. Muslims are encouraged to fast six days in Shawwal, the month following Ramadan, Mondays and Thursdays, and the ninth and tenth, or tenth and eleventh of Muharram, the first month of the year. The tenth day, called Ashurah, is also a fast day for the Jews (Yom Kippur), and Allah commanded the Muslims to fast two days to distinguish themselves from the People of the Book.

While fasting per se is encouraged, constant fasting, as well as monasticism, celibacy, and otherwise retreating from the real world, are condemned in Islam. Fasting on the two festival days, Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, the feast of the Hajj, is strictly forbidden.